

Man Over Machine

Patrick McGeown on how he
brought an errant machine into line

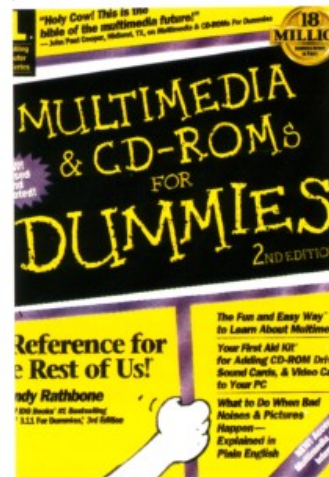
Technology is causing me problems. I think I understand the most simple of instructions but sometimes these instructions leave me lost. They look simple. The salesman says they're simple. But in the end I'm the one left feeling simple. I have to confess I find very little of today's modern technology simple to understand.

Sometimes I watch videos. I am fortunate to have other audio visual wonders — and each has its own remote control. Five remotes in a row. The television, video, laser disc, hi-fi and satellite. If I want to stop the video I have to study each remote control carefully and then decide which is the right one to use. But sometimes a phone call will require me to stop the video machine quickly. And in that moment of haste all controls look the same and I end up pressing all five until I find the right one. Friends don't understand the stress I experience just by answering a phone.

My camera is big. The salesman sold me the larger size with lots of buttons and dials because he said it was the best one for me. I agreed. He recognised a man of intelligence when he saw me. And anyway the camera looked impressive. I read the instructions. Camera instructions are easy for some people — possibly photographers who work with cameras every day of their lives. I knew I had to study the instructions very, very carefully. They took a long time to understand. I read, re-read and read again. When I understood them to the best of my ability I took some photographs. They turned out quite shabby indeed, and then it was a month before I used the camera again. I forgot what to do. And had to read the instructions once again. How boring. There is more to do in life than reading camera instructions. So now I take pot luck. Pot luck doesn't work. Too many dials, the viewfinder has too many flashing red and green lights, and I have too little patience. Film is another problem. The sales assistant asks, do

equipment that have convenient electronic clocks. They are all flashing. So every day I am reminded how simple I am. Manufacturers should make signs that you can stick under the clock: "This person is stupid and cannot set an electronic clock."

I have a lovely computer. Everything functions perfectly until I get a new program. Then the real trouble starts. For example I bought the CD game, *Return to Zork*. No matter what I did I couldn't get it to work. The man in the shop tested it on his machine. It worked perfectly. The computer company that I bought the computer from insisted nothing was wrong with the computer; it was the CD. I re-read the instructions



Reading this book helped me understand myself.

that came with the game, and spent hours changing configurations. I gave up. The CD sits in my drawer as a constant reminder of my inferior intelligence.

My computer has a CD-ROM drive. To make it work I need a program called Sound Blaster. The man said it would be easy to install. And if

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I want a 100 or 200 film. I just smile with a mindless gaze and nod.

My video and hi-fi have electronic clocks. Once upon a time I set them. But every time we'd have a power black-out they'd revert to double zero's and scream for resetting. I got bored with searching for the instructions. Now the clocks just flash. In my home I have six pieces of

I had any problems all I had to do was double check my CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT files. Easy, he said. It certainly sounded easy. Once home I was like a boy with a new toy. I installed the new program, and the computer sent me a message. The message was simple and clear but meant absolutely nothing to me. I hunted for the books that came with the com-

puter to try and decipher it. I spent hours doing everything the books said. It still didn't work. So it was off to Pantip Plaza to buy a better and easier book to understand.

At the bookshop in Pantip I asked to see the manager privately and whispered to him I was having great problems with the program that runs the CD-ROM drive. He directed me to the range of books for dummies. Yes, for dummies. Never in my years of marketing would I have ever thought a title would succeed if it identified its target as dummies. So I looked at the book: *Multimedia & CD-ROMs For Dummies*. I was so embarrassed. What if my friends saw me. Or my students from university. Or, worse still, my computer client. How I wished I'd worn dark glasses and a coat. The shop assistant too had a smirk on her face. I think she was saying, "Look at that stupid man."

But I was forced to buy this book. I had to get my computer going, and I can do it myself. I'll say it once and say it a thousand times: a computer is a machine and it is not going to get the better of me. So I bought the book for dummies. Then the shop assistant placed the book in a clear plastic bag for the whole world to see. This was just too much. I read the book. Simple and easy to understand. And I did everything the book said. But still the CD-ROM drive wouldn't work. I changed those funny little CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT files just like the book said. Same problem. I wasted 20 frustrating hours trying to get that CD-ROM to work.

A handyman doesn't give up. I did what most

intelligent people would do. I removed the back off the computer. Looking deep into its brain I saw some computer boards with lots of wires and other things I can't describe. I also noticed some boxy looking things with wire belts hanging off them. They certainly looked all right to me. I don't know what I expected to find — nor did I know what I was looking at. Perhaps if I had found a dead rat or a bird's nest I would have instantly seen the problem and rectified it.

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When electricity travels to a destination it isn't meant to it lets you know quickly. A bang, a wee puff of smoke and a shudder. The CD-ROM still didn't work. Nor did the computer.

The computer looked okay on the outside. The man in the shop took the back off the wretched machine and shook his head. He exclaimed, "What happened here?" I was not about to destroy my credibility as a human being — and I was certainly not about to tell him the truth. I told him a neighbourhood technician tried to fix it. He shook his head and said, "He must be an idiot." I nodded in agreement.



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